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著者	Nemoto Noriko, Ueda Masanobu
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Some Semantic Properties of Ditransitive Expressions with Verbs of Giving

Noriko Nemoto and Masanobu Ueda

Goldberg (1992, 1995), who analyzes a number of linguistic phenomena within a Construction Grammar framework, assumes the ditransitive construction to be a case of "constructional polysemy". By this term she means that the single form of the ditransitive corresponds to different but related senses. "Successful transfer" is at the hub of these senses. Other senses are assumed to be extensions from the central sense. We deal especially with the ditransitive expression with this sense. The attention is accordingly limited to prototypical verbs entering into this expression, that is, verbs of giving which include *give*, *pass*, *hand*, *serve*, and *feed*.

First, in order to make clear the semantic properties of the central case, we argue against Goldberg that the central sense of the ditransitive does not involve the sense of "successful transfer". Rather, we claim that it is a reflection of lexical meanings and situations expressed. This being the case, the question which we must consider next is what alternative requirements are imposed on the ditransitive construction. Based on the observations made by Green (1974) and Wierzbicka (1988), we recognize two requirements on the ditransitive: (i) the co-existence requirement and (ii) the expectation requirement. At present we cannot discuss whether or not other requirements would be involved and whether or not those two requirements could be unified into a more schematic notion. These are left to further research.

Goldberg adduces, as evidence for her analysis, the following infelicitous data in (1), where the second sentences are intended to negate the meaning of "successful transfer". A careful observation of these expressions, however, will soon awaken us to more complex facts than Goldberg expects. Compare (1) and (2):

- (1) a. ?John gave Mary a rose but she never got it. (Wierzbicka 1988: 366)
b. *Mary gave John a punch, but he barely missed being hit.
- (2) a. John gave everyone a rose by putting one in each person's mailbox, but because the building was destroyed by the earthquake, before anyone arrived at the school, no one actually got their rose.
b. Mary gave John a wink but he didn't see her expression.

The contrast between (1b) and (2b) is due to the difference between their lexical meanings, specifically, those of *a punch* and *a wink*. An act of punching requires "successful transfer"; an act of winking does not. In order that we recognize an act of punching, one's fist has to reach the target person. This action implies the notion of contact. On the other hand, an act of winking does not necessarily imply such a notion. It is sufficient to look towards the target person and close one's eye very briefly. It is not crucial whether or not the target actually

receives the signal. The proposition described by the ditransitive expression in (2b), unlike that in (1b), is therefore deniable.

The reason why sentence (1a) is marginal is probably because this sentence obtains an inappropriate interpretation from the given context. Given a context where transfer is indirectly carried out, even with the verb *give*, we easily find the proposition to be deniable, as illustrated in (2a). What it expresses is the situation where John left each rose at a certain prearranged location with the expectation that everyone would get theirs; it does not matter whether all the roses were actually taken.

Now that we are sure that "successful transfer" is not the sense inherent in the ditransitive construction, the next step is to consider alternative semantic requirements imposed on this construction. We assume that the co-existence requirement and the expectation requirement are involved in the ditransitive construction.

The co-existence requirement, which is proposed in Green (1974), says that the participants of the ditransitive expression have to exist during the same period of time. Example (3a) is thus unacceptable. She judges that example (3b) is felicitous even though the intended transfer occurs at some future point in time, and concludes that the co-existence requirement does not apply to verbs like *pay*.

- (3) a. *I promise to lease future generations my land at \$1 an acre.
- b. I promise to pay future generations of Sioux \$1 a year for the use of this land.

(Green 1974: 108-109)

Green's conclusion should be questioned. (3b) makes sense only if it is understood in the following context: I promise to pay future generations of Sioux \$1 a year for the use of this land as long as I live. This suggests that the subject has to meet the future generations. Therefore, the co-existence requirement does hold for (3b).

Finally, we make a short remark on the second requirement, that is, the expectation requirement, which is based on insights provided by Wierzbicka (1988). She argues that the meaning of "successful transfer" is not ascribed to the ditransitive construction. What the construction implies is that the "target person is expected to HAVE an object" (Wierzbicka 1988: 365). Though she puts sentences like (1b) outside the scope of the investigation, this expectation requirement seems to hold with such cases.

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